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Enhancing Experience and Support Provided to Students within Bologna Professionally-Focused Master's Degree

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Abstract

The main objective of this study is to analyse Master's students' views on the competences of (i) the ideal profile of a Master's supervisor, and (ii) the ideal profile of their own, as Master's students. Accordingly, a descriptive and reflective perspective regarding the results is adopted. Additionally, the authors have the objective of presenting a set of recommendations that can help students to deal with the different dimensions and contexts of their student/professional experience: theoretical and pedagogical content, teacher training pre-service tasks, and practice-based research projects. The recommendations go in line with the promotion of support programmes that should not follow a one-size fits all approach, but should instead consider the diversity among students' profiles as a flagship towards institutional quality enhancement.

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1. Introduction

This paper brings valuable insights about the Master's degree quality profiles of students and supervisors from both theoretical and empirical perspectives, integrates its reading at a national level and finally draws some considerations about the topic and its implications based on the intersection between the data collected and its reference theoretical background. Although data were gathered within a specific Higher Education (HE) institution and it will be essential to present the national background on the 'renewed' Master's degree, we strongly consider that this paper will address other international contexts' concerns, due to the supra-institutional and supra-national character of this theme.

One of the major aims of the Bologna process was to make Europe's HE systems more transparent and competitive. Therefore, the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA)

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(Bologna Working Group, 2005) provided a mechanism for aligning the qualifications frameworks of different countries to each other, trying to accomplish a comparative goal. It is intended that these Bologna graduates must be equipped to enter a variety of types of employment and, in particular, possess the skills and experience necessary for the specific profession or area of practice.

Therefore, considering the focus of this paper, a Master's graduate is expected to have: subject-specific attributes, an in-depth knowledge and understanding of their profession, informed by current practice, scholarship and research, a critical awareness of current issues and developments regarding the subject and the profession, the ability to apply research to professional situations, both at practical and theoretical levels, the ability to use a range of techniques and research methods applicable to their professional activities, and other generic attributes (including skills relevant to an employment-setting) (QAA, 2010).

Within this context, Warring (2011) defined the concept of “Mastersness” emphasising the relevance of seven facets about what constitutes Master's level study: Abstraction, Depth (of Learning), Research and Inquiry, Complexity, Autonomy, Unpredictability and Professionalism. These facets have been used, refined and defined in the context of the project: *Learning from International Practice: Postgraduate Taught Student Experience* (Working Group chaired by Veronica Bamber with the strategic management from the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee - a committee with a membership of all Vice-Principals in Teaching and Learning from all Scottish HE institutions or their equivalents). The project addressed the answers to the question: “What does it mean to be a Master's- level student and how are they supported in making that transition?” Moreover, the model learnt itself to be developed into a tool to be used by practitioners in workshop sessions. Results have indicated that the work on supporting students into Master's-level study is deeply associated with the support provided to practitioners and the complexity of the provision (QAA, 2014).

On the other hand, until this moment, we find a gap in the literature regarding the quality profile that the Master's supervisor should have, so s/he can help the student to achieve the “Mastersness”. Therefore, much more effort should be put in questioning and analysing the professional implications and outcomes of the supervisory role within the particular context of Teacher Training.

In fact, in the context of Teacher Training, the focus of this paper, given the professional nature of this area, some aspects of the reforms carried out (and that will be explored in the next section) offer different opportunities and challenges for students, supervisors and employers to create a multifaceted landscape which requires a shared understanding of the nature of the programmes and the profiles of the graduates (Bünning & Shilela, 2006).

2. Portuguese background on Master's degree

The Bologna Process has motivated major changes in the Portuguese legal framework concerning the role of the Master's degree in the context of the Teacher Training courses (Portuguese Republic Law 43/2007). At present, according to the new *Legal Framework for Qualifications for Teaching* (Portuguese Republic Law 1189/2010), the Master's degree has the core objective of conferring professional qualifications legally required to teach at all levels: from Pre-School to Secondary Education. This recent legal background has moved the emphasis from a purely research-focused Master's approach attended by previously legally awarded professionals (until the academic 2007/2008) to a professionally-focused approach to achieve the teaching qualification.

This new design of the Master's degree stresses that training at this postgraduate level aims to promote the construction of the teacher's professional identity, by including the development of research skills and an in-depth reflection on professional contexts combined with a critical understanding of different dimensions of the educational career. It promotes a strategic interaction between the teaching and research processes, with reference to the development of a set of knowledge about the action in pedagogical settings intertwined with references from the scope of the areas of educational sciences and teaching.

In practice, this means that, within the 2nd cycle of Bologna (that corresponds to the Master's degree), students will have 3 semesters with curricular units associated with Didactics (teacher and learning pedagogy in specific content areas: Portuguese language, Maths, Science/Geography/History and Arts/Design, ICT), curricular development and organisation or epistemology of education. In the second and third semesters, the students have a curricular unit that integrates and supervises a pre-service experience (teacher training internship) in a kindergarten (2nd semester) and primary school education (3rd semester). Simultaneously, Master's students have a specific

curricular unit (seminar) where reflection on the professional contexts of the pre-service practice allows the development of a research project aiming to answer a research question chosen by the student. This research project, at the end, will have the form of a research report that integrates: (i) the answers to the chosen research questions, and (ii) an integrated in-depth reflection about the research impacts and outcomes to the daily life and practice of the future teacher. This approach allows the development of a clear interaction between theory/practice/action and a feedback from and to the professional setting – considered to be the major asset emerging from this new Master's design.

Considering the new configuration of the Master's degree in Portugal, discussions must be stimulated in order to understand the consequences to the actors that are involved: Master's students, teachers of the taught courses, cooperative supervisor at the educational context – the school where students (teachers-to-be) do the teacher practice internship, as well as the research supervisor. In addition, other reflections must be stimulated to better comprehend the impact of those changes in terms of curriculum design; the choice of pedagogical approaches; the definition of the 'frontiers' regarding teaching vs learning vs research contexts. Furthermore, it leads us to question the learning paths 'Bologna students' experience in this postgraduate level of study. Following the latter idea, it drives us to question what the quality profiles of all those actors previously identified are.

3. Methodology

This study follows a qualitative approach based on the development of a focus group in order to explore in-depth conceptions of the participants, and simultaneously analyse the coherence and proximities of their opinions. It seeks to access the voices of students who attend Master's studies, aiming to discuss, reflect, share experiences, present and confront perspectives, sensitivities and perceptions. This strategy for data collection was chosen, because it stimulates interaction, discussion, and self and meta-reflection among participants. It encourages participants to engage in the "dynamic nature of the process", be actively involved and "think conceptually" (Greenbaum, 2000, p.13).

A very small group constituted with 4 students was run, since the authors wanted to provoke an intense and open discussion. Moreover, it was assured that a comfortable context for the participants to share their experiences, values and beliefs was established. It was followed a semi-structured focus group: at the same time there were certain thematic frontiers, there was also a space for diversity, and flexibility. The Master's students have opened themselves to each other and to the discussion, sharing similar perspectives on several topics: course design and approach, its overall quality, the ideal quality profiles of Master's students and supervisors, the teaching, learning and processes, and skills' development. This fact highlights that their experiences crossed and are tuned, reinforcing the conclusions we describe in the next section. Therefore, in the next section, a descriptive perspective regarding the results is adopted.

Although the focus group only involved 4 students, an individualistic approach to the data was emphasised in order to capture the actual grounded experience of the group as a whole as well as each individual contribution. The participants were 4 female students from the Master's in Pre-School and Primary Education, enrolled in a Higher Education institution in the northern part of the country (Portugal). These students were born in the period between 1979 and 1989.

4. Results

4.1. *Quality profile of Master's students*

Hearing Master's students' voices we must highlight that, first of all, a Master's student in a Teacher Training course should be totally passionate for teaching and practice. Considering that the subject was chosen by them and emerged from their practice, they must always put great effort on all their tasks; must feel truly involved, available to learning and to be enriched along the way; and must be intrinsically motivated to become experts in that specific topic, by improving themselves as future teachers, and the context where they work. In fact, willingness to work, to be bold/audacious in the way they are involved in practice and the way they will work the topic that they choose to

research, and curiosity are other competences that should always drive them – both as professionals/teachers-to-be and eventually future researchers.

Moreover, the Master's students, who participated in the focus group, truly believe they must be autonomous and should know how to manage their time: they should construct their individual knowledge, by intersecting theory, practice and research. This means that they consider that the Master's student should be mature, and thus look to the theory and practice with critical eyes. This critical positioning is essential not only to collate and systematise perspectives from diverse sources, but also to be reflective to overcome difficulties, to search for 'newness' and suitable strategies to always enhance the practice and the overall educational context where they are integrated.

4.2. Quality profile of Master's supervisors

From Master's students' perspectives, the competences which should integrate the quality profile they consider their supervisors should demonstrate are almost like a 'mirror', when taking into account the quality profile they should demonstrate as Master's students. Consequently, focus group's participants' mention that their supervisors should have an open and flexible perspective regarding the theme they, as Master's students, choose to work on and their own subjective/personal contexts. Accordingly, the supervisors should also be involved and aware of practical knowledge and/or contextual practical, and how theory links to practice and vice-versa. In fact, the focus group's participants assume that the supervisors who have experience of real practice in schools are better supervisors: they demonstrate an enhanced understanding regarding the practice demands and thus have a critical point of view on the research project designed by the Master's student, which may or not be adjusted to the practice and context.

Furthermore, the supervisor must give timely and prompt feedback, due to the time constraints Master's students feel regarding the 'renewed' Master's degree. Simultaneously, the supervisor must have a demanding and challenging attitude towards the work carried out by the Master's student, so the latter can overcome barriers, obstacles and his/her own frontiers of knowledge. Consequently, the supervisor is seen as someone who should create conditions and lead the student towards knowledge, but not giving only one solution or open only one pathway. Instead, the supervisor should provoke their curiosity, and above all should stimulate and motivate the Master's student, so s/he can search for theories, put these into practice and assess its suitability according to the professional and subjective contexts one can find in schools.

5. Final reflections and recommendations

As previously mentioned, it may be observed that both quality profiles of Master's students and supervisors are indeed like a 'mirror', due to the competences that each member of the dyad should demonstrate and enhance so the research, theory and practice can be embedded in each other. Moreover, proximity and availability of each member of the dyad towards each one, and towards theory-context/practice-research are essential, due to the 'renewed' nature of the Master's degree. This implies a deep involvement of both of them in enhancing the professional context where the Master's student is integrated from a holistic point of view, since they are working with and helping human beings to flourish.

From our practice and data collection, recommendations for intervention in this area may include several topics:

- Integration of more practice-based experiences for students during the first cycle of Bologna. Therefore, adjustments in the curricular design in the first cycle courses are needed;
- Assigning more time to work on the dynamics between three inter-related vectors - theory/practice/research - by students and supervisors since the first day when students begin their Master's degree pathway;
- Creation of opportunities for the development of a closer relationship between students and supervisors;
- Promotion of more contact with the daily practice of students by the supervisors, so the latter can also experience the practice experience as their Master's students;
- Facilitation of more dialogic opportunities among Master's students who are in different moments of their learning development process. The creation of short informal events for Master's students to share their experiences, with and/or without the presence of their supervisors, seems to be important to help students to reflect on their practice and to overcome possible difficulties;

- Implementation of mentoring experiences among Master's students, in order to share points of views, supervisory experiences and to always have a third party support who can shed light on several issues.

Finally, the underlying topics for further reflection in this domain may also include the links and/or frontiers regarding theory/practice/research and the importance (and place) of research at this postgraduate level.

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